

*Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009*

**Remarks to Students, Faculty, and Parents at James C. Wright Middle School in Madison, Wisconsin**

*November 4, 2009*

Thank you, everybody. Hello, Madison! Thank you so much. Thank you. Everybody, please, have a seat. Have a seat.

It is good to see all of you. Good to be back in Madison. I want to first of all just say that Jim Doyle is not only one of the finest Governors we have in the country but is also a great friend, a great supporter; his entire family has been wonderful. And so I just could not be prouder to associate myself with the outstanding work that Jim has done in the State. Please give him a big round of applause.

We've got two wonderful mayors in the house. First of all, your own, Dave Cieslewicz, is here—Dave. And Milwaukee's outstanding mayor, Tom Barrett, is in the house.

I am so impressed with the work that's been done here at Wright Middle School, and I know that Principal Nancy Evans deserves a huge amount of credit, so please give her a big round of applause. And to the faculty and the staff, but most importantly, the students, who I had a chance to meet with earlier today, they are just some outstanding young people. So if there are any parents of students in the house, you should be proud, and give them all a big round of applause.

Now, it's great to be back in Madison, great to be back in Wisconsin. And I've heard great things about Wright, so I've got very high expectations for all the students here, and I told them this. I expect them to keep up the good work that you've already been putting in to make sure that you succeed not just in middle school, but also in high school, also in college, and for the rest of your lives. And parents, I want you to stay on them because that is an absolutely critical ingredient for their success.

You know, 1 year ago, Americans all across this country went to the polls and cast ballots for the future they wanted to see. Election day was a day of hope, it was a day of possibility, but it was also a sobering one because we knew even then that we faced an array of challenges that would test us as a country. We already saw that there was a financial crisis that threatened to plunge our economy into a great depression, the worst that we've seen in generations. We had record deficits, two wars, frayed alliances around the world.

Facing this reality, my administration had two fundamental obligations. The first was to rescue the economy from imminent collapse. And while we still have a long way to go, we have made meaningful progress toward achieving that goal. We acted boldly and swiftly to pass a Recovery Act that has made a difference for families right here in Wisconsin, and Jim, your Governor, described the difference that it's made.

We've put a tax cut into the pockets of 95 percent of hard-working families. We created or saved over 1 million jobs, including 4,000 education jobs right here in Wisconsin. We've taken steps to unlock our frozen credit markets so that the ordinary American can get the loan that he or she needs to buy a home or a car, to go to college or start a new business. We've enacted measures to stem the crisis in our housing market to help responsible homeowners stay in their homes and curb the decline of home values overall.

So all these things contributed to the first quarter of economic growth that we've had as a nation in over a year. The rate of job loss is slowing, although not nearly fast enough yet. The work continues. But we're moving in the right direction, and we are going to keep on fulfilling our obligation to do every single thing we possibly can to pull this economy out of the ditch and to make sure that people can find jobs that pay good wages. That's our top priority.

So that was the rescue part of our job, just solving the immediate crisis. But we also came into office with another goal, another obligation, not simply to do what needed to be done to deal with an emergency crisis, but to make those long-term investments necessary to build our economy stronger than before. It was an obligation to tackle problems that had been festering, problems that had been kicked down the road year after year, decade after decade, problems that have to be overcome for America to move forward.

See, even before the crisis, we were having big problems. We were just papering them over. Manufacturing was declining, and we weren't producing as many high-tech, high-skilled jobs as we needed to be. We had an energy situation where suddenly, oil producers or speculators want to constrict supply, and next thing you know, you're paying 4 bucks at the pump. So we didn't have energy independence. Health care costs were skyrocketing—before the crisis—so that families were seeing more and more out-of-pocket costs and essentially trading away salary and wages just to keep up with their premiums.

So we had an obligation to create a better health care system that works for our people, our businesses, and our Government alike. And that's why we've been pushing so hard on health care reform. That's why we took up the cause of a clean energy economy that will free America from the grip of foreign oil and generate millions of good-paying jobs in the process—green jobs in retrofitting old buildings to make them more energy efficient, creating the batteries and other technologies needed for plug-in hybrids that can get 150 miles a gallon—and will help to curb climate change. And that's why we're taking up the cause that I'm here to talk about today, and that is offering the best possible education to America's sons and daughters.

American prosperity has long rested on how well we educate our children. But this has never been more true than it is today. In the 21st century, when countries that outeducate us today will outcompete us tomorrow, there is nothing that will determine the quality of our future as a nation and the lives our children will lead more than the kind of education that we provide them. Nothing is more important.

And here is what we know: Over the course of a lifetime, those with a college degree—and I want the young people here especially to listen to this—over the course of a lifetime, those with a college degree earn over 60 percent more than those with only a high school diploma, 60 percent more. Most of the fastest growing jobs require a bachelor's degree or more. This is what we were talking about earlier in the classroom. Four out of every 10 new jobs will require at least some advanced education or training within the next decade. So put simply, the right education is a prerequisite for success. There was a time when if you just got a high school education and you were willing to work hard, you could get a job in a trade or in the factory that paid a middle class wage. And those days are declining. The currency of today's economy is knowledge.

And yet we continue to trail other countries in a number of critical areas. The United States, a nation that has always led the way in innovation, is now being outpaced in math and science education. A handful of States have even gone in the wrong direction, lowering their standards at the very moment that they should be raising them. We used to rank number one

in the number of college graduates and advanced degrees. That's not the case anymore. Meanwhile, African American and Latino students continue to lag behind their white classmates, an achievement gap that will ultimately cost us hundreds of billions of dollars because that's our future workforce.

Of course, these problems aren't new. We've heard about them for years. But instead of coming together to solve them, we've let partisanship and petty bickering stand in the way of progress. It's been Democrat versus Republican; it's been voucher versus public schools; it's been more money versus more reform. In some cases, people have seen schools as sort of a political spoil having to do with jobs and contracts instead of what we're teaching kids. And this status quo has held back our children, it's held back our economy, and it's held back our country for too long. It's time to stop just talking about education reform and start actually doing it. It's time to make education America's national mission.

Now, I'm proud to say that thanks to one of the best Secretaries of Education America has ever had, Arne Duncan, who's here today—stand up, Arne, so everybody can see you—[*applause*]*—*thanks to Arne's passion and understanding of these issues and the ability to bring people together, that's exactly what we're going to do. We are making this America's national mission: improving our schools. Not in unrealistic ways, not in abstract ways, not in pie-in-the-sky ways, in concrete ways we are putting our resources behind the kinds of reforms that are going to make a difference.

In the coming weeks, States will be able to compete for what we're calling a Race to the Top award. We're putting over \$4 billion on the table—4 billion with a "b"—one of the largest investments that the Federal Government has ever made in education reform. But we're not just handing it out to States because they want it. We're not just handing it out based on population. It's not just going through the usual political formulas. We're challenging States to compete for it.

And I have to tell you, this was not an easy thing to get through Congress. This is not normally how Federal dollars work. But because of Arne's tenacity and our commitment to make sure that reform happens, that's how we've structured it. We're saying to States, if you are committed to real change in the way you educate your children, if you're willing to hold yourselves more accountable, and if you develop a strong plan to improve the quality of education in your State, then we'll offer you a big grant to help you make that plan a reality.

Now, before a State is even eligible to compete, they'll have to take an important first step. And this has caused some controversy in some places, but it shouldn't be controversial. Any State that has a so-called firewall law will have to remove them. Now, here's what a firewall law is. It basically says that you can't factor in the performance of students when you're evaluating teachers. That is not a good message in terms of accountability. So we said, if you've got one of those laws, if you want to compete for these grants, you got to get rid of that law.

And we'll encourage States to take a better approach when it comes to charter schools and other innovative public schools. When these schools are performing poorly, they'll be shut down. But when innovative public schools are succeeding, they shouldn't be stifled, they should be supported.

And I'm proud to say that already a number of States have taken us up on this challenge. Across the country, different groups are coming together to bring about change in our schools: teachers unions and parents groups; businesses and community organizations. In places like New Haven, educators and city leaders have come together to find a smarter way to evaluate

teachers and turn around low-performing schools. In States like California and Indiana and Wisconsin, you're seeing steps taken to remove these so-called firewall laws so we can have a clear look at how well our children are learning and what can be done to help them learn better. States like Delaware and Louisiana, Tennessee and Illinois are all making efforts to let innovative charter schools flourish.

So a race to the top has begun in our schools, but the real competition will begin when States apply for the actual Race to the Top grants. See, they had to make some changes just to even join the race. But now the race starts, and we're going to start seeing even more interesting changes at the local level. So we'll take a hard look at States' applications to determine whether they measure up. We'll take a look at a State's track record to determine whether the steps they've taken have had real results when it comes to their students' education. We'll take a look at whether States are taking an all-hands-on-deck approach when it comes to reform. And in particular, we'll take a look at how States are doing when it comes to four key measures of reform.

And I want to get into some details about this because I want you, as parents, as well as the educators, to understand what the data and the science and the studies and the research show actually make a big difference in terms of school improvement, and that—because that's what we are basing this stuff on. We didn't just kind of make it up, didn't just do it because it sounded good; this is what the research shows is really going to make a difference.

The first measure is whether a State is committed to setting higher standards and better assessments that prepare our children to succeed in the 21st century. And I'm pleased to report that 48 States are now working to develop internationally competitive standards—internationally competitive standards because these young people are going to be growing up in an international environment where they're competing not just against kids in Chicago or Los Angeles for jobs, but they're competing against folks in Beijing and Bangalore.

This is something I called for earlier this year, and I want to commend the leadership of the Governors and school chiefs who've joined together to get this done. And because of these efforts, there will be a set of common standards that any State can adopt, beginning early next year. And I urge all our States to do so and to upgrade what's taught in the classroom accordingly to meet these international standards.

I also challenge States to align their assessments with high standards—because we should not just raise the bar, we should prepare our kids to meet it. There's no point in having really high standards but we're not doing what it takes to meet those standards. And I want to be clear: This is not just about more tests, because I know that in the past, people have been concerned about, you know, is this about standardized tests, or are we going to have our young people being taught to the test? That's the last thing we want.

But what we want to do is finally get testing right. So it's not about more tests; it's about being smarter about our assessments. It's about measuring not only whether our kids can master the basics, but whether they can solve challenging tasks; do they have the skills like critical thinking and teamwork and entrepreneurship; assessments that don't just give us a snapshot of how a student is doing in a particular subject, but a big picture look at how they're learning overall; and assessments that will help tell us if our kids have the knowledge and the skills to thrive when they graduate.

So we're not just interested in can they fill out a bubble. Right? What we want to do is to take a look generally: Are kids learning and gaining the critical thinking skills that they need to

succeed? Now, these are the kinds of assessments that our States should be putting in place, and we're setting up a separate competition where they can win grants, extra grants to help them do just that.

So, standards and assessments, that's the first measure; are we doing that well? If the State wants to get a Race to the Top grant, they've got to do that well. And because we know that from the moment our kids enter a school, the most important factor in their success—other than their parents—is the person standing in front of the classroom, the teacher, the second measure is whether a State is committed to putting effective teachers in its classrooms and effective principals at the helm of its schools.

Now, it's time to start taking this commitment seriously. We've got to do a better job recruiting and preparing new teachers. We've got to do a better job of rewarding outstanding teachers. And I've got to be honest, we've got to do a better job of moving bad teachers out of the classroom once they've been given an opportunity to do it right.

And that means creating alternate pathways to teaching for talented young people by expanding programs like the one used in Boston, where aspiring teachers work side by side with effective mentors in a year-long residency. It means bringing quality teachers in—it means bringing quality teachers to the neighborhoods that need them the most, because right now a lot of what happens is, is that some of the best teachers, as they get seniority, they move on to the places, the school districts that pay better and, frankly, are easier to teach in. And we've got to give them some incentives to stay so that the kids who need the most help are getting some of the best teachers.

It means boosting the numbers of quality teachers who can help our special education and English language learners meet high standards. And you've done that here at Wright, so congratulations on that. It means improving instruction in science, technology, reading, math, and ensuring that more women and people of color are doing well in those subjects. So that's the second factor.

Third factor, third measure we'll use in this Race to the Top competition, is whether States are tracking the progress of our students and teachers to make sure every child graduates ready for college and a career. So, as I said earlier, before a State can even apply for a grant, it has to change any laws that prevent us from factoring in the performance of students when they're evaluating their teachers. But that's not enough. If a State wants to increase its chances of actually winning a grant, it's going to have to do more. It's going to have to collect information about how students are doing in a particular year and over the course of an academic career and make this information available to teachers so they can use it to improve the way they teach.

One of the things that teachers get so frustrated about is these standardized tests come at a time when it's too late to use to actually help the students improve their performance. So if we're going to collect data on how kids are doing, let's make sure the teachers have it in usable form so that they can actually start doing a better job.

Now, that's how teachers can determine what they should be doing differently in the classroom. That's how principals can determine what changes need to be made in our schools. And that's how school districts can determine what they need to be doing better to prepare our teachers and principals.

Now, even with stronger standards, better assessments, outstanding teachers, some schools will still be difficult to turn around. I want us to be honest about this. There are some

schools that are starting in a tough position: a lot of kids coming from impoverished backgrounds; a lot of kids coming in that may have not gotten the kind of head start that they needed; they start school already behind. And even though there are heroic teachers and principals in many of these schools, the fact is that they need some extra help.

And that's why the fourth measure we'll use in awarding Race to the Top grants is whether a State is focused on transforming not just its high-performing schools, not just the middle-of-the-pack schools, but the lowest performing schools. We'll look at whether they're willing to remake a school from top to bottom with new leaders and a new way of teaching, replacing a school's principal if it's not working and at least half its staff—[*applause*—close a school for a time and then reopen it under new management, even shut down the school entirely and send its schools—send its students to a better school nearby.

I mean, there's always excuses for why these schools can't perform. But part of what we want is an environment in which everybody agrees—from the Governor to the school superintendent, teachers, principals, and most importantly, parents and students—that there's no excuse for mediocrity. And we will take drastic steps when schools aren't working.

So these are the kinds of vigorous strategies that are necessary to turn around our most troubled schools: transforming our lowest performing schools; using timely information to improve the way we teach our children; outstanding teachers and principals in our classrooms and our schools that are getting the support they need; higher standards and better assessments that prepare our kids for life beyond a classroom. These are the challenges, the four challenges that States have to take up if they want to win a Race to the Top award. And these are the four challenges that our country has to meet for our children to outcompete workers around the world, for our economy to grow and to prosper, and for America to lead in the 21st century.

Now, let me just close by saying this, and I've said this before, but I never miss an opportunity to impress this upon an audience. Lifting up American education is not a task for government alone. It will take parents getting more involved in their child's education. It will take schools doing more to reach out with parents. It will take students, students, accepting more responsibility for their own education.

I was explaining to them that education is not saying where, you know, you just tilt your ear and you just pour it in your ear. [*Laughter*] You've got to be an active participant in wanting to get an education.

These aren't in my prepared remarks, but I think it's important to note that Malia and Sasha are just wonderful kids, and Michelle is a wonderful mother. But in our own household, with all the privileges and opportunities that we have, there are times—look, there are times when kids slack off. There are times where they would rather be watching TV or playing a computer game than hitting the books. And part of our job as parents—Michelle and my job—is not just to tell our kids what to do, but to start instilling in them a sense that they want to do it for themselves.

So Malia came home the other day. She had gotten a 73 on her science test. Now, she's a sixth grader. There was a time a couple years ago when she came home with like an 80-something, and she said, "I did pretty well." And I said, "No, no, no—that's"—I said, "Our goal is 90 percent and up."

Here is the interesting thing. She started internalizing that. So she came, and she was depressed, "I got a 73." And I said, "Well, what happened?" "Well, the teacher—the study guide didn't match up with what was on the test." "So what's your idea here?" "Well, I'm going

to start—I've got to read the whole chapter. I'm going to change how I study, how I approach it." So she came home yesterday, she was—"I got a 95." Right? So she was high-fiving.

But here's the point. She said, "I just like having knowledge." That's what she said. And what was happening was she had started wanting it more than us. Now, once you get to that point, our kids are on our wave. But the only way they get to that point is if we're helping them get to that point. So it's going to take that kind of effort from parents to set a high bar in the household. Don't just expect teachers to set a high bar. You've got to set a high bar in the household all across America.

It will take teachers unions and parents and elected leaders working together as partners in common effort, not seeing each other as antagonists, but all of us having the same goal. It will take each and every one of us doing our part on behalf of our children and our country and the future that we share.

I'll never forget a moment many years ago; this is long before I ran for President, before I ran for elected office. I was just starting out as a community organizer in Chicago. And we had set up a meeting to figure out how to rebuild our neighborhoods that I was working in, very impoverished neighborhoods on the south side. And nobody showed up to the meeting. This is my first big meeting; nobody showed up. So I was pretty depressed. I had some community leaders, some volunteers who had helped me try to organize this thing, and they were depressed. They felt so defeated they were talking about quitting. Everybody was too apathetic; they said, "There's no point in trying."

But then I looked outside as I was listening to them talk, and I saw some young boys playing in a vacant lot across the street, and they were just throwing rocks at an old apartment building that was boarded up. And those boys reminded me of me, who didn't have a father in the house and who got in some trouble when he was young. And I turned to those volunteers, and I said, "Before we quit, I want to ask you a question. What's going to happen to those boys if we quit, if we give up on them?" And I thought, if we can't see that we have got a stake in those young boys, if we're not willing to do our part on their behalf, if we fail to recognize that the fight for their future is the fight for our own future, well, who is going to do it?

So one by one, those volunteers, they stayed. Family by family, we reached out to the community. Slowly people started coming to meetings. Block by block, we helped to turn those neighborhoods around and helped to improve some of those schools in the area.

And that's the common spirit—the spirit of common purpose that all of us have to have in America today. And I'm absolutely confident that if we're all willing to come together and embrace that spirit—in the living room, in the classroom, and the statehouse, on Capitol Hill—then not only will we see our students reaching farther, not only will we see our schools performing better, not only are we going to help ensure our children outcompete workers abroad and that America outcompetes nations, but we're going to protect the dream of our founding and give all of our children, every last one of them, a fair chance and an equal start in the race to life.

Thank you very much, everybody. All right. Thank you. God bless, and God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:40 p.m.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : James C. Wright Middle School in Madison, WI :: Remarks to students, faculty, and parents.

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*Names:* Barrett, Tom; Cieslewicz, Dave; Doyle, James E.; Duncan, Arne; Evans, Nancy; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha".

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